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Sherman Alexie's "Armani Indians" and the New Range of Native American Fiction

Two years after the publication of James Welch's *The Indian Lawyer* (1990), Fritz Scholder, the most acclaimed of contemporary Native American painters, exhibited an extraordinary painting which could serve as the cover illustration for Welch's novel. The painting was titled *Indian Contemplating Columbus*, and it relied for some of its effect on a verbal and pictorial pun. Executed in black, blue, white and yellow acrylics, it shows the back view of a man dressed in western clothing, sitting in a chair on a high-rise apartment porch and contemplating Columbus, or, to be more precise, the dimly suggested skyline of a city, apparently – Columbus, Ohio. The pictorial pun is on the viewer's expectations. The almost automatic visual association Scholder's title triggers is with "the view from the shore" – of natives watching the Genoese and his companions set foot on an American beach. Conditioned by centuries of visual stereotyping to think that "Indian" equals naked torsos and feathers, the momentarily disoriented viewer scans the picture for the evidently missing indigenous observer of Columbus. It is usually then that he spots a moccasin on the man's right foot, a small splotch of red, green, and white that looks ill-fitting in the overall color scheme of the picture. Once noticed, however, that small detail begins to usurp the viewer's attention until the moccasin eventually becomes the composition's center. Many long seconds later we begin to discern also something like a suggestion of a white feather in the man's hair. The apparently missing Indian has been there all along, except that he is an Indian whose existence the white world has been slow to acknowledge – the urban, acculturated, white-collar Indian professional of the kind James Welch made the protagonist of his novel.

The process of bringing to American awareness this particular category of Indian – the "Armani Indian," as another painter, Michael Furlow, humorously labeled him – has been remarkably slow despite the fact that within the last two decades he has become a familiar figure in the media, in the arts, on university campuses, and in some business circles. It is noteworthy how, even though the majority of contemporary Native American authors clearly have been aware of his existence (as they have themselves lived the privileged lives of fairly well-paid and assimilated university professors), they have on the whole refrained from representing in their fiction this ideologically troublesome kind of Indian experience. Instead, they have explored – often brilliantly – the historical as

well as the modern indigenous world, populating their fiction with an array of characters who – if they live in the twentieth century – are usually poor to very poor reservation or urban Native Americans, struggling to survive and to preserve their aboriginal identity in the confusing world of cultural options. As a rule, in what Lawrence Buell has termed the “ethno-essentialist denouement” typical of contemporary ethnic fiction (239), these Indian characters, having briefly sought assimilation, eventually choose to reject the racist urban America and to embrace the traditional world of tribal values. Only in a handful of novels do we see Native Americans who have gained a secure foothold in the world outside the reservation: the anthropology professor in Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris’s *The Crown of Columbus* (1991), the Toronto photographer in Tom King’s *Medicine River* (1989), the lawyer and well-nigh runner for the Congress in James Welch’s *The Indian Lawyer* (1990). One could mention also several aspiring students, such as appear in Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine* (1984) and *Bingo Palace* (1994), Louis Owens’ *Wolfsong* (1995), and Linda Hogan’s *Power* (1998), yet they do not belong entirely in the same category. They are only beginning their climb up the American social ladder, testing an option that, as happens in the case of Owens’ Joseph or Hogan’s Omishto, may yet be rejected.

Against this background of fiction which exhibits little interest in assimilated Indians, Sherman Alexie’s two recent collections of stories, *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000) and *Ten Little Indians* (2003) stand as a deliberate and sustained effort to bring that particular group of Native Americans into the awareness of literature readers. Alexie’s turn towards the educated, prosperous, urban Indian professional may be explained as a reflection of the writer’s personal situation; his phenomenal artistic success jettisoned him within one decade into the world of wealth as well as Indian and non-Indian human variety. In a recent interview, he commented on the relation between his new situation and his writing: “A few years ago, at my oldest son’s birthday... I looked around the room and I realized there were 2 gay couples, 2 lesbian couples, 7 countries, 12 states, senior citizens – all hues and shades – and I thought, ‘Well, this is my life,’ and my art wasn’t representing that” (*Publisher’s* 1). But one senses also another impulse behind the writer’s effort to catch up with his changing circumstances. Early on, Alexie made his reputation as an irreverent, defiant polemicist, in serious disagreement with the writers of what might be called the First Wave of Native American Renaissance – N.Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, Louis Owens, and to some extent also Louise Erdrich. From his first novel – *Reservation Blues* (1995) – on, he has argued that contemporary Indian life is far less traditional or spiritual than they claim it to be, that far from being rooted in tribal mythology and ritual, the traditional sense of the sanctity of the earth, or the tribal vision of history, Indian life at the end of the twentieth century

is marked by cultural dislocation and shaped primarily by the American mass media. He has thus objected to representing the reservation as a pocket of cultural resistance, focusing instead (in the manner of James Welch, a less orthodox representative of the First Wave) on its crushing material poverty and the debilitating effects of alcoholism and violence. In other words, Alexie has consistently tried to redefine the meaning of "Indian experience" as it came to be understood in the eighties due to the imaginative impact of the First Wave writers. Therefore, his more recent choice to write of the well-to-do and assimilated Indians can be seen as only another step in his ongoing polemical project. What his literary seniors have ignored or only barely acknowledged (again, except for Welch, who explored the problem in *The Indian Lawyer*) Alexie brings to focus with the intention of complicating the picture and derailing certainties. By writing about Indians who are emphatically different in every conceivable way from Momaday's Abel, Silko's Tayo, Owens' Joseph, or Erdrich's Fleur or June or even Lipsha, Alexie challenges the popular notions about what it means to be an Indian at the turn of the centuries, as well as about what makes a novel or a story distinctly, unmistakably Native American.

Even a cursory look at the stories in *The Toughest Indian in the World* and *Ten Little Indians* reveals how deliberately Alexie zeroes in on one particular type of Indian characters. The cast of *The Toughest Indian* includes a Coeur d'Alene woman working for Microsoft and married to a white chemical engineer; a Spokane lawyer whose "monthly salary exceeds [his] mother's yearly income" (*Toughest* 40); a half-blood Coeur d'Alene fiction writer who brags to a friend: "I make shitloads of money. I make so much money that white people think I'm white" (*Toughest* 144). In *Ten Little Indians*, several protagonists move even higher up the economic and social ladder. One, a Spokane, contributes to a think tank, selling ideas – a product so insubstantial he is troubled by a fear that "his job... [isn't] a real job at all" (*Ten* 116); another, working for the Governor of Washington, contemplates running for the Senate. Even more interestingly, several of those characters are not the first but second generation rich. The Apache protagonist of "Do You Know Where I Am?" was born to two acclaimed Indian architects known for the Seattle skyscrapers they designed. She and her equally privileged Spokane husband can say of themselves: "[We] were Native American royalty, the aboriginal prince and princess of western Washington" (*Ten* 151). Without exception, Alexie's rich protagonists hold university diplomas, live in gentrified neighborhoods of Seattle or Spokane, (the architect couple in a posh house they designed themselves and painted turquoise), drive Saabs and BMWs, hold several credit cards, exercise regularly, "take vitamins, eat free-range chicken and smoke cigarettes rolled together and marketed by six odiferous white liberals in Northern California" (*Toughest* 7). There is a tremendous social and economic distance separating these prosperous-to-very-wealthy individuals from the key

characters in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993) and *Reservation Blues* (1995) – most of whom are frustrated, jobless, often alcoholic drifters, unable to take control of their lives. When towards the end of *Ten Little Indians*, having prepared the reader to expect only more stories of assimilated life, Alexie unexpectedly makes his protagonist in “What You Pawn I Will Redeem” a homeless Spokane wino, his intention appears transparent: the drunk’s happy-go-lucky inertia provides a measure for the seemingly more fortunate characters’ accomplishment. At the same time, the fact that the story is likely to be responded to as more recognizably “Indian” than the tales of successful, white-collar Native Americans serves to problematize the concept of “Indian fiction.”

With remarkable persistence, in one story after another, Alexie specifies each character’s tribal identity. Even in those texts which are primarily studies in human psychology (“Can I Get a Witness?” or “Do You Know Where I Am?”), he never fails to mention their Spokane or Coeur d’Alene or Crow descent. Most often the characters are full bloods, though some have a white or a black parent. Their genealogical Indianness is asserted beyond doubt, in a manner clearly provocative, if one considers the ample evidence of their thorough acculturation. This, however, seems to be the writer’s way of addressing the issue which has preoccupied him ever since he became a “white-collar American Indian writer” (*Guardian* 5). In brief, the nature of the issue is this: how does one categorize an individual who is unmistakably genealogically Indian and fully aware of his racial identity, yet at the same time has had an experience from which many if not most of the elements traditionally associated with Indian livelihood are missing? Can anybody, and on what grounds, decide that such a person is not an Indian? “One Good Man,” a story collected in *The Toughest Indian*, lists half in earnest several such essential, defining elements of Indian experience; when its narrator is pressed by his skeptical white teacher to say if he’s an Indian, he muses:

Of course I was. (Jesus, my hair hung down past my ass and I was dark as a pecan!) I’d grown up on my reservation with my tribe. I understood most of the Spokane language, though I’d always spoken it like a Jesuit priest. Hell, I’d been in three car wrecks! And most important, every member of the Spokane Tribe of Indians could tell you the exact place and time where I’d lost my virginity. Why? Because I’d told each and every one of them. I mean, I knew the real names, nicknames, and secret names of every dog that had lived on my reservation during the last twenty years. (224-225)

Besides physical features, then, what makes an Indian as understood here is his reservation background, some command of the tribal language, a communal sense, an insider’s

knowledge of the tribe's secrets, and a set of defining experiences, such as, for instance, the proverbial Indian reckless driving. But what if several such constitutive elements are missing in an individual's biography? What if a *fullblood* has grown up in the city, maintains only loose contacts with the reservation, speaks only English, does not drink, and religiously can best be described as an agnostic – does this mean that such a person is not an Indian or is not Indian enough? These are the questions that Alexie teases the reader with in one story after another.

The answer implicitly articulated in his two collections is that there are many ways to be Indian, none of them more genuine than the other, and that these ways are evolving all the time. Alexie's urban, educated, wealthy Indian characters are forging such new ways and creating new definitions of Indianness. That Indians must change in the changing world has been obvious for writers of Native American Renaissance. N.Scott Momaday, for example, has spoken about evolution and change as the only alternative to extinction: "When we talk about preserving a heritage or a culture, this is not exclusive of change by any means. Quite the reverse. The last thing, the most dangerous thing that the Indian can do is to remain static, become a museum piece" (Isernhagen, 40-41). The notion that change is not irreconcilable with continuity was memorably articulated in Leslie Silko's *Ceremony* in the figure of Old Betonie, a Navajo medicine man, who makes use of old telephone directories in his ancient healing rituals. However, Betonie appears traditional through and through, despite that extravagant concession to modernity, when compared with Alexie's disturbingly assimilated characters. Yet the fact that Alexie's protagonists' "modernity" is likely to be found excessive, provoking questions about who they really are culturally, reveals that some tacit agreement exists about how change must not affect some unspecified fundamentals. While telephone directories, cars, cowboy boots, and Miss Indian World Pageant may still be viewed as reconcilable with the spirit of Indian culture, religious skepticism or ambitious individualism or neglect of tribal ties and responsibilities will be interpreted by many as disqualifying. This is not, however, Alexie's standpoint.

There is much more than mere financial security that separates Alexie's characters in the two collections from the "genuine" Indians as they are defined in the passage from "One Good Man." Their ties with the reservation are usually loose and facile. For those who grew up on one, like Mary Lynn of "Assimilation," the reservation is a place where she had been happy; even so she "left it without regrets" (*Toughest* 2) and feels no urge to return. More critical than her, the writer of "Indian Country" remembers his childhood without nostalgia and refuses to romanticize his birthplace. "He believed Coeur d'Alene Reservation to be a monotonous place," Alexie writes, "a wet kind of monotony that white tourists saw as spiritual and magic" (*Toughest* 122). Even Corliss of "Search

Engine,” who is only taking her first steps away from home as a university student, already feels estranged from her reservation relatives by her passion for literature, which they cannot share or comprehend. Unlike most First Wave Indian fiction, Alexie’s stories do not present such separation from the ancestral locus as essentially impoverishing or tragic. And this is not a new position for the Spokane writer. As early as *The Lone Ranger* (1993), he refused to mythologize the reservation, portraying it as ridden with violence, frustration and anger. In “Do You Know Where I Am?” written a decade later, he sounds less harsh, but here the reservation has already receded into the background as a feeble force no longer jeopardizing the main character’s survival or offering to him much sustenance. This character, regularly sent by his white mother to spend summers with his Indian father’s parents in order to keep in touch with his heritage, remembers only reading crime stories to his grandfather and going to garage sales with his grandmother. His wry observation that “for many Indians garage sales and trashy novels are highly traditional and sacred” (*Ten* 150-151) only restates Alexie’s long familiar argument that the reservation, considerably acculturated despite much wishful thinking and popular belief, offers little in the way of traditional spiritual nourishment. Thus, for many characters in *The Toughest Indian* and *Ten Little Indians*, home is already (and unremorsefully) elsewhere. This is poignantly so for William Loman of “Flight Patterns,” whose handsome house in residential Seattle, “surrounded by gray water and gray fog and gray skies and gray mountains and gray sun” makes him reflect that “he couldn’t imagine living anywhere else... or in any other time” (*Ten* 108).

Away from tribal enclaves, William Loman and others like him begin to reexamine and reassess the nature of the ties that bind them with their tribes. Quick as they may be to introduce themselves as enrolled members, several of them begin to wonder about the actual significance of what they are saying. Grace Atwater of “Saint Junior,” for example, half-Mohawk but living and working across the continent from her ancestral homeland, realizes one day that to speak about the Mohawks as “her people” is in fact to mindlessly mouth a cliché. “Her people,” she reflects, “what an arrogant concept! They didn’t belong to her and she didn’t belong to them” (*Toughest* 162). While Grace begins to doubt the reality of her tribal ties, the Coeur d’Alene heroine of “Assimilation” realizes that they are actually more significant to the white people she associates with than to herself. In fact, she finds being categorized as a Coeur d’Alene an encroachment on her sense of individuality and uniqueness. In the eyes of others, her being Indian, instantly frames her, she complains, becoming “an excuse, reason, prescription, placebo, prediction, or diminutive,” while what she wants is “to be understood as eccentric and complicated” (*Toughest* 2). Endowed with individualistic self-consciousness, Alexie’s upwardly mobile characters, who see themselves as victims of racial stereotyping – even if

it is stereotyping of the favorable kind – attempt to disassociate themselves from the native community. For beginning climbers such disassociation may additionally entail some practical benefits; this is especially evident in the case of the highly individualistic and highly motivated Corliss, who decides to live alone in Spokane, despite the extravagance of her decision and despite the loneliness it sentences her to. Yet, as the narrator explains,

She didn't want to live with another Indian because she understood Indians too well... If she took an Indian roommate, Corliss knew she'd soon be taking in the roommate's cousin, little brother, half uncle, and the long lost dog, and none of them would be contributing anything toward the rent other than wispy apologies. Indians were used to sharing and called it tribalism, but Corliss suspected it was yet another failed form of communism. (*Ten* 9-10)

In all three cases – Corliss's, Grace's and William's – tribal bonds are found to be either illusory or burdensome, and so the characters neglect to sustain them or deliberately work to disentangle themselves from their grip.

What goes hand in hand with this weakening of tribal ties is often a realization that there are other "tribes" one has meanwhile unwittingly joined. They may be social or professional or intellectual, and they join people across racial divisions. Corliss begins to drift away from her people because she becomes progressively involved in the world of books, discovering that she belongs more passionately and wholeheartedly in the community of poets than on the reservation. In her life, the process is only beginning, but in William Loman's it has already brought about crucial changes in his self-perception. Sure enough, Loman is "an enrolled member of the Spokane tribe." But he is also a businessman, introduced to the reader on his routine business day as he is taking an early morning taxi to the airport. And it is with thousands of other businessmen like himself, who are doing exactly the same thing at the same moment, that he feels a kinship. Alexie describes them all as "capitalistic foot soldiers" (*Ten* 109), making up together an unrecognized "notebook-computer tribe and the security-checkpoint tribe and the rental-car tribe and the hotel-shuttle-bus tribe and the cell-phone-roaming tribe" (*Ten* 109). They are a group of people sharing a lifestyle, a set of experiences, and a mindset. Apparently, there is more that Loman has in common with any one of them than with some racially defined community.

Despite Alexie's urban characters' separation from their tribal homebase, and despite their middle class lifestyle, they do retain – different characters to a different degree – some very basic sense of indigenous tradition and ritual. However, as may be expected from people who, like the lawyer of "Class," go to opera performances and art shows

rather than to powwows, and who, like William Loman, are “bemused and slightly embarrassed owner[s] of twenty-first century mind[s]” (*Ten* 103), they are self-conscious about their relation to that tradition, and they freely adapt the old rituals to meet their new situation, needs and means. And so Alexie presents them going on “vision quests” and experiencing “visions,” staging “dead-honoring ceremonies” or drumming and singing to affect change with their magic. However, the circumstances for these ceremonies and the props employed are usually so freely transplanted from a non-Indian cultural system and seem so incongruous with traditional spiritual practices, that the reader is confounded and bemused to see old conceptual shells claimed for actions apparently so unspiritual and ordinary. Adding to this, Alexie often sounds comically irreverent when he writes about traditional pieties, as when, for instance, he grants his very secular-minded protagonist in “Whatever Happened to Frank Snake Church?” a vision so inaccurate in every detail and so far off mark about the time of the death it predicts that the exasperated Frank cannot help concluding “there must be an expiration date for the ESP” (*Ten* 201). Despite their often comic nature, the customized ceremonies, remotely based on old forms, do help the urban Indians in the stories to meet the challenges of the new circumstances. William Loman, scared of flying after September 11, resorts to his own version of magic to control reality: before every flight he listens to a home-made tape of music by rock musicians who died in plane crashes to ward off bad luck, terrorists, and his own fear. In a Seattle hospital, the desperate mother of a comatose baby in “Do Not Go Gently” chants to wrestle her boy from death’s grip, beating the drum with a huge battery-powered vibrator her husband bought when in his grief he wandered into a sex-shop, mistaking it for a toy store. She makes the crude gadget of mechanical pleasure a magic-working tool in a personalized ritual of healing and restoring order. Remarkably, her magic not only saves her baby, but also sustains the parents of other sick and dying children in the ward. In a similar appropriation of whatever means are available, Frank Snake Church decides to honor his dead mother by giving up his promising basketball career, a source of his pride and hope for the future. Many years later, this time to honor his dead father, he decides to return to playing, because returning means a murderous, body-mortifying training program and humiliating competition with the much younger. Thus, a basketball, a tape of rock tunes, a vibrator become new means with which ancient rituals are made to serve new realities. However, this does not mean that they are practiced with the traditional unselfconsciousness or abandon. A comment by the narrator of “Do You Know Where I Am?” leaves no doubt about how self-conscious and often skeptical Alexie’s urban Indians are about their spiritual practices: “We practiced our tribal religions like we practiced Catholicism: we loved all the ceremonies but thought they were pitiful cries to a disinterested god” (*Ten* 150).

Alexie's Indians' occasional bows to tradition do not make them any less twentieth-century or American. The majority of characters in *The Toughest Indian* and in *Ten Little Indians* navigate skillfully the waters of contemporary America because they have learned and espoused mainstream American ways and skills. Often remarkably individualistic and ambitious (for their own sake rather than for the sake of any community), they know their own value and crave appropriate recognition. The Black Indian narrator of "Lawyer's League" advertises himself in an assertive, recognizably American (or Black) manner: "I am one of the best and brightest Native Americans, and I am one of the best and brightest African Americans, and I am ambitious, so I plan on becoming the first half-black and half-Indian US senator. After three or four years in the Senate, I'll go for the White House" (*Ten* 55). If this phenomenally successful and motivated young man eventually fails to accomplish either of his goals, it is not because he is ignorant of the system's workings or because he naively underestimates white America's suppressed racism, but because, having assaulted in a fit of anger an influential white lawyer during a game of basketball, he can easily calculate the odds against him, and sees no alternative to backing out. The fact that Alexie's educated and worldly-wise Indians are not intimidated by the intricacies of the American system or ignorant of white America's mentality allows them to skillfully manipulate both to their advantage, by for example, benefiting from the late twentieth century positive ethnic stereotypes and Indianophilia. Estelle Walks Above, a full-blood Spokane in a story titled "The Life and Times of Estelle Walks Above," starts in her student days a long climb up to art professorship, not only by working hard, but also by "becoming more Indian" in the presence of liberal white women. What this means is dropping her original, insufficiently Indian-sounding last name (Miller), becoming Walks Above, and dispensing half-feminist, half-Indian wisdom to her white friends and followers so effectively that they "start running around Seattle, speaking with singsong reservation accent" (*Ten* 136).

The story which addresses the question of the white-collar Indian's Americanness most directly is "Flight Patterns." The protagonist, William Loman, is introduced as "the bemused and slightly embarrassed owner of the 21st century American mind" (*Ten* 102). He is a wealthy liberal, uncomfortable in the liberal way about class distinctions, investing his money in companies which claim making profit only through ethical means, and regularly disciplining himself to entertain proper feminist attitudes – in other words, a white-collar professional, sharing mental inflections and knee-jerk reactions with the people of his social class. It is interesting how Alexie characterizes Loman's mind by mentioning a handful of names and titles: Donna Fargo, Yvonne Vaughan, Elizabeth Taylor and her seven husbands, Ernie Hemingway, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, Righteous Brothers, Pat Benetar, *The Declaration of Independence* and Smokey Robinson.

The list suggests the mind of an average educated American, shaped in a rather unequal measure by American educational system and popular culture. Spicing the list, there are two Indian names – Crazy Horse and Chief Dan George – but the context in which they appear is significant. Loman, Alexie writes, “didn’t want to choose between Ernie Hemingway and the Spokane tribal elders, between Mia Hamm and Crazy Horse, between *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* and Chief Dan George” (*Ten* 102). Clearly, Loman rebels against such rigid dichotomies, and what he sees as parochialism for which being Indian may sentence an individual, should he or she choose to live *exclusively* in the tribal world, while the non-Indian traditions are available to him or her as well. Loman does not deny his Spokane heritage, but will not disclaim what he has absorbed from the American or generally western culture either. Nor does he see any reason to privilege one heritage over the other. Moreover, in this respect, he is not at all unique in *Ten Little Indians*. In contrast with Alexie’s earlier books, limited in their range of reference only to figures from the Indian-American past and from contemporary popular culture, this collection swarms with names of personages from western history and American and English literatures. In an almost ostentatious name-dropping spree, he mentions in the book Alexander the Great, Thor Heyerdal, Elizabeth Bishop, Mme. Curie, Edmund Hillary, (Antoni?) Pawlak, Gerald Manley Hopkins, and Andy Warhol, thus to communicate his protagonists’ cosmopolitan rather than tribal frame of mind.

Yet it takes the conversation between Loman and the immigrant Ethiopian taxi driver to reveal to the reader and to Loman himself the thoroughness of his assimilation. First, he is surprised to be taken for a Jewish-American businessman, which suggests that, despite his indigenous braids, he clearly does not *look like* a member of any suppressed and exploited minority. He is recognized by the taxi driver for what he is – a prosperous American liberal, aware of his privileged situation and feeling faintly guilty about it, whose compassion and generosity can be easily stirred with stories of immigrant misfortunes, especially ones that imply the extent of the listener’s American luck. So Loman is told such a story of a refugee separated from his family, language, culture, and country. It cannot be said with certainty if the driver’s story is true or merely a well-rehearsed lie told to entice a good tip, but the question of its authenticity is irrelevant. What matters is that the story reveals to Loman how, though historically speaking he is also an individual displaced and dispossessed, the parallel between himself and the taxi-driver is illusory. It would be outrageous to claim otherwise when Loman reaps all the benefits of living in the country which dispossessed his Indian ancestors. Personally, he is not a victim. He has a comfortable home, a well-paying job, and a loving family he can provide for. His talents are appreciated and he is not an object of racial prejudice. He may be pulled over for random security checks at airports because his skin is dark (the irony of his being

targeted as a potential Arab terrorist amuses him; evidently, as an Indian he is believed to have no conceivable motif for resorting to terrorism), but he half-welcomes such measures as the price for the privilege to feel secure. The immigrant taxi-driver seems to guess all of this and so, undecieved by decorative details, he drops Loman off at the airport, saying "Goodbye, William American" (*Ten* 123).

There is an interesting shift in how Alexie's characters respond to the fact of their assimilation that becomes evident when *The Toughest Indian* and *Ten Little Indians* are studied together. In the earlier collection, three stories out of nine are directly concerned with an assimilated protagonist's efforts to assert his or her Indian identity. Mary Lynn of "Assimilation," the lawyer of "Class," and, in a somewhat different way, the journalist of "The Toughest Indian in the World" – all act motivated by some sort of anxiety about whether, after many years of living in the white environment, they are still Indians. In the first two cases of people married to white spouses, it is the crisis in their marriages that becomes the catalyst of their fear. Should their marriages break up, they will lose some of that secure sense of who they are and where they belong. So they find it necessary to make sure that at least their racial identity is unthreatened. Mary Lynn tries to do it by having sex with an Indian. She selects a complete stranger, solely on the virtue of his dark skin, and their quick encounter in a seedy motel is nothing but a sad, humiliating affair for both. The lawyer, in turn, goes to a cheap Indian bar, in the hope he will be reembraced and consoled there. He gets beaten up instead, and is advised by the barmaid to never come back and, more importantly, to stop deceiving himself about the bar Indians being "his people." To the unemployed, homeless patrons of the bar, she mercilessly illuminates him, he stands for everything they would like to be and to have, but never will. So they cannot comprehend his misery or sympathize with it; they find it pathetic, and can only hate him. The unbridgeable chasm between them and the lawyer is symbolized in the story by the clothes the latter is wearing on the night of his attempted reunion – the GAP corduroys and loafers – which are instantly read by the bar Indians as signs of his non-belonging. What both the lawyer and Mary Lynn discover as a result of their painfully failed encounters with "their own people" is that the true constants in their lives are their white spouses and their white-Indian families, whom they penitently rejoin soon after.

The third story of an assimilated Spokane Indian seeking to reassert his Indian identity describes an equally harrowing experience, yet this time the outcome is different. The journalist-narrator, who out of nostalgia for his childhood always picks up (like his father used to) Indian hitchhikers, consents to sex with a man he has given a ride to, although he (the journalist) is not a homosexual. Again, the encounter is described as unenjoyable and embarrassing, but unlike the other two cases, it stirs in the journalist

a dormant sense of connection with and longing for his tribe. As the story ends, he leaves the motel, abandons his car and the assignment he was traveling on, to start barefoot on a long trip along the highway “upriver, toward the place I was born and will someday die.” “At that moment,” he says, “if you had broken my heart, you could have looked inside and seen white skeletons of one thousand salmon” (*Toughest* 34). The metaphor is transparent. Like the salmon (Spokanes, Alexie never tires of reminding his readers, are the Salmon People), he yields to an urge in the blood which the encounter with the salmon-smelling hitchhiker stirred in him. His Indian identity, which has shrunk to bare bones, reasserts itself, takes control of him again, and he chooses to nourish it by returning home, presumably to the reservation. Thus, while Mary Lynn’s and the lawyer’s stories suggest that urbanity combined with prosperity constitute together an assimilationist Rubicon which, once crossed, cannot be recrossed, the story of the journalist expresses a hope to the contrary.

However this anxiety about not being “Indian enough” becomes far less pronounced in *Ten Little Indians*. Here, Alexie’s protagonists lose interest in proving to the world what they apparently feel quite secure about. One exception is Harlan Atwater in “The Search Engine,” a Spokane who was adopted and raised by white parents. Like the lawyer of “Class,” he tries once, and once only, to fraternize with bar Indians. This time the result is less disastrous, primarily because everybody, including Harlan, passes out on the drinks he is buying. Even so, when he sobers up, he realizes “his people” care for him not a whit more than they do for his books of poetry, which he gave out to them the night before and which he finds in the morning littering the pavements in the bar’s vicinity. But other Indian characters in this collection seem untroubled by any urge to prove they are Indians. Moreover, there is a note of defiance in the way they (or Alexie) speak about their nontraditional, individual manner of being indigenous. Having drawn Corliss as a person with a passion for western poetry, Alexie’s narrator asks a predictable, stereotype-tapping question: “What kind of Indian loses her mind over a book of poems?” And he instantly answers the question: “She was that kind of Indian, she was exactly that kind of Indian, and it was the only kind of Indian she knew how to be” (*Ten* 9). What else but a witty defiance can be heard also in the words of Estelle Walks Above’s son, who remarks about himself:

I rarely look in the mirror and think I’m an Indian. I don’t necessarily know what an Indian is supposed to be. After all, I don’t speak my tribal language and I’m allergic to earth. If it grows, it makes me sneeze. In Salish, Spokane means ‘Children of the Sun,’ but I’m slightly allergic to the sun. If I spend too much time outside, I get a nasty rash. (*Ten* 134)

The comedy of an Indian allergic to the sun and earth in a howling rebuttal of the enduring "Nature's Man" stereotype serves to articulate only more poignantly the point Alexie seems to be making throughout the book: that there is no limit to the number of ways one can be Indian, no ready made pattern, no single model preferable to other models. The ways to be indigenous in the twenty-first century have yet to be devised by every Indian for himself. This is exactly what his characters are doing, as they are moving – some of them confidently, others hesitantly – wherever their personal guiding spirits are prompting them to go, often in defiance of stereotypes and the expectations of those who claim to know better.

Yet, there *is* a discernible direction in which Alexie's white-collar Indians seem to be moving. That direction is identified by Estelle's son, who allows himself two sets of goals. One is to "let go of the worst of Indian: 1. low self-esteem, 2. alcoholism, 3. misogyny, 4. lateral violence." The other is to hold on to the best: "1. the cheerful acceptance of eccentricity, 2. the loving embrace of artistic expression, 3. the communistic sense of community" (*Ten* 135). Several key characters in the two collections of stories conform remarkably to these guidelines. Ambitious, witty, capable of auto-irony, they don't drink and they shun violence. They are sympathetic to women's aspirations and show no trace of homophobia. In a clear movement away from the Indians in *Indian Killer*, they are not racists either. If there is one trait they miss rather obviously, it is the communal spirit. Their aggressive individualism, concern primarily with their own goals, sets them apart from such memorable figures in Alexie's earlier books as Thomas Builds-the-Fire or Marie Polatkin, those tireless, dauntless community helpers and healers.

Alexie speaks eloquently in his recent fiction for revising all entrenched notions of the Indian, including the ones formed in the last three decades, so that middle class, acculturated Indian Americans are not excluded from the category. However, this does not mean that he propagandizes for or uncritically glamorizes urban Indian life or accomplishment. There is a subtle undertow in his rich Indians' stories that moderates the impression of affirmation and sympathy. The new urban Indianness has its costs. Alienation seems to be the most obvious of them – alienation from the community, often from work and family. A sense of faint, unspecified dissatisfaction hovers over several stories of success in both books. Even Loman, described in one place as perfectly happy with where, when, and how he lives, in another is characterized, somewhat incongruously, as a person who "no matter where he lived... always felt uncomfortable" (*Ten* 111). For reasons not entirely clear, he sleeps poorly, and is obsessed with a fear he might lose his wife and daughter. Nostalgia for his happy childhood, in turn, consumes Frank Snake Church, a man lonely and emotionally deprived, who is characterized as "suffering from a quiet sickness, a sort of emotional tumor that never grew or diminished, but prevented

him from living a full and messy life” (*Ten* 205). Even the apparently happiest couple in *Ten Little Indians*, the protagonists of “Do You Know Where I Am?” who survive because they learn to forgive the disappointments they have caused each other, come to realize in their old age that their “contentment was always running *only slightly ahead* of their dissatisfaction” (*Ten* 167, emphasis added).

If Alexie’s recent stories are approached in the way Andrew Macdonald argues in his study *Shape-Shifting* that all Indian stories should be approached, that is as weaving jointly a web of significances and commenting on one another “until little flashes of insight illuminate the connections that are presently just beyond view” (66), then perhaps the key text in *Ten Little Indians* is “Can I Get a Witness?” It is in this story that signals only faintly audible in the other ones are amplified to communicate a misery that nullifies all accomplishment. The story’s protagonist is a middle aged Indian woman going through a mid-life crisis. She is disappointed with her marriage to her Indian husband, a flag-waving patriot, and estranged from her two sons, whom she hates and is hated by. Crushed furthermore by the boredom of her white-collar job, she feels so utterly defeated that when on September 11 the first news of the terrorist attack cause panic in the Seattle office building where she works, she is the only person who does not run but stays in the window-walled conference room on the sixtieth floor, *hoping* for another plane to come crashing in. When several months later, a suicide bomber enters a restaurant in which she is having lunch, she greets him with a smile. She survives the bombing, but when she emerges unhurt from the rubble, her only hope is that, found missing, she will be presumed dead, which will give her a chance to start as somebody else all over again. The reasons for the woman’s misery are strictly personal, yet amplified in her experience are all the problems – emotional coldness, disappointment, loneliness, alienation, exhaustion – that more or less deeply taint the privileged lives of all Alexie’s urban Indians.

The latest collection’s title, *Ten Little Indians*, may be contributing to that undertow as well. Evoking as it does the second stanza of the children’s song, in which the number of Indians decreases one by one with every line, the title may be suggesting that something is being lost after all as Indians turn Native *Americans* and let themselves be “thoroughly defeated by white culture... conquered and assimilated” (*Ten* 151). Knowing Alexie’s love of punning, does not the title “Flight Patterns” beg to be read not only literally, as “flying schedules,” but also as “escape patterns,” where the “escape” need not be an act of liberation but of desertion? If one entertains all these possibilities, one may begin to see the only story in the collection that does *not* feature a rich Indian but a homeless wino as not entirely marginal to the book’s message. Down and out Jackson Jackson, the protagonist of “What You Pawn I Will Redeem,” possesses all the traits which are missing in the lives of the other characters – a natural, instinctive sympathy

with the needy, a sharing spirit that is stronger than any wish to possess, a freedom that is known only to those who do not plan or yield to ambition, and a sense of direct, personal connection to the past. Obviously, Alexie is the last person to suspect of trying to romanticize the life of squalor and deprivation or the psychologies such a life produces. Yet while Jackson's poverty, recklessness, and dependence on white people's sense of decency become a measure of his more fortunate tribesmen's advancement, his virtues provide a yardstick with which to measure the cost they have paid for moving up economically and socially.

Alexie's recent collections will probably once again rekindle the old debate concerning the significance of the term "Native American fiction." In the eighties and nineties that debate led to identifying a set of traits regarded as unique to the Native American variety of ethnic writing. Addressing the problem in a book of extensive interviews conducted by Hartwig Isehnagen, N. Scott Momaday and Gerald Vizenor have described those traits in relatively inclusive terms. According to Momaday,

Native American literature... is distinguished from other literatures.... It has its own experience and its own language, its own rhythms.... It represents a particular kind of experience, and a particular viewpoint, a particular world view.... Native Americans... see the world as possessed of spirit, for one thing. They have a great respect for the earth and for the physical world.... [Furthermore,] Native Americans have a very highly developed sense of language and a very rich oral tradition, and I think they tend to take language more seriously than most other people. They have a very highly developed sense of humor, which is not easily accessible to other people.... [T]he artistic expression of the Native American world is very special. (30-31)

Momaday's list is amended by Vizenor with the observation that Indian writers make active use of mythic material and that they communicate a unique sense of the relationship between man and landscape. They don't "make it a safe place or a Mother Earth, but... a powerful source of imagination and mystery in character" (99).

By the standards specified here, the key texts of the Native American Renaissance – *House Made of Dawn*, *Ceremony*, *Fools Crow*, and to a considerable extent also Alexie's early stories – are representative of Indian fiction. However, *The Toughest Indian* and *Ten Little Indians*, like Welch's *The Indian Lawyer*, fit the description only erratically. Therefore they either have to be classified as not belonging in the category, or seen as modifying the existing definitions. Like Welch's novel, catalogued by Macdonald in *Shape-Shifting* as detective fiction and described by Owens in *Other Destinies* as "the common domestic human drama rather than anything particularly Indian" (26),

Alexie's two books of stories push radically outward the boundaries of what Momaday refers to as "a particular kind of [Indian] experience." Like Welch, Alexie insists his characters *are* Indians. They *know* it at some deepest, elemental level, they are recognized as Indians by others, and they fashion their lives sometimes in defiance of the existing stereotypes of Indianness, and sometimes by exploiting the opportunities which those stereotypes offer. At the same time, they live assimilated American lives away from their ancestral homelands, in urban isolation from the natural world, and in ignorance of the traditional world view, ways, and values, the last vestiges of which survive only in their customized, secular rituals. Their "particular kind of [Indian] experience," except for an occasional identity crisis or an attempt to resist being framed by the concepts of others, is not essentially different from the experience of millions of Americans of the same class – white, Asian, or Black – and is marked by general human problems, such as a sense of disillusionment or exhaustion, loss of love or sexual interest, nostalgia for the past, fear for the loved ones, anxiety about terrorism, and the like. Furthermore, these characters are interpreted by an authorial consciousness that is not traditional either. Their espousal of American ways is not viewed critically as betrayal of Indian cultural identity (the way, for instance Emo and the other veterans are viewed by the authorial consciousness in *Ceremony*) but as an inevitable development when a people have been sentenced by history to survive in a sea of aggressive culture irreconcilable with and inimical to their own. The fact that Alexie's characters are not necessarily happy is not the author's way of indirectly condemning their existential choices, but rather of concluding about the condition of the modern man in general. To blame their unhappiness upon their distance from traditional Indian roots would mean committing the romantic fallacy of equating bliss with the past and the non-western.

It is also clear that Alexie's fiction published in the twenty-first century advances an agenda distinct from that proposed by the First Wave of Native American Renaissance writers. Their principal goals were to revise history and to reveal how colonialist mentality and practices survive in the present. They denounced America for its destruction of the Indian world, and rejected American racism, materialism, and spiritual degradation, pointing at the same time to the reservation as a bastion of resistance, capable – despite its deprivations – of nourishing individuals strong enough in their traditional wisdom and vision to face the challenges of modernity. Their collective message was: we suffered and we continue to suffer, but we survived and, braced with our ancient heritage, we can fashion a new life for ourselves, not entirely traditional because life moves on, but built on solid traditional foundations. By contrast, Alexie's two recent collections ignore or question his predecessors' goals in a manner almost ostentatious. Except for one story in *The Toughest*, "Sin Eaters" – a metaphor of Indian fate in the last 400 years derived from

science-fiction – history is absent in the two books. It offers no keys to interpreting the fates of the characters. The historical victimization of Native Americans has some indirect bearing upon their present day privileged lives only inasmuch as they benefit from white sense of guilt turned into political correctness or Indianophilia. One or two of them, as they climb up, may hit their heads against the glass roof of racism incomparably more subtle than an explicit racist slur or the refusal to serve Indians, but generally they are shown as living in a world surprisingly free of racial hostility. What a reader familiar with Alexie's *Indian Killer* will find most unexpected is the number of decent, unprejudiced whites featured in his recent stories. As for the importance of the reservation and tradition, Alexie had written about the pathologies of the former and the demise of the latter long before he published *The Toughest Indian in the World*. In the concluding story of *Ten Little Indians*, "Whatever Happened to Frank Snake Church," the theme returns: the protagonist's nostalgia, literally for his happy childhood but metaphorically for all things past, is denounced as corrosive of spirit. "Nostalgia is cancer. Nostalgia will fill your heart with tumors" (*Ten* 228), a Black man called Preacher warns Frank, who will not let go of his memories of the better past. Thus Alexie, who is very aware of the extraordinary power he wields as "a literary writer [with] a semi-pop image" (*Publisher's* 1), articulates a different message for his Indian readers. The message is: the traditional way of being Indian is an option no longer available to many contemporary Native Americans. At the same time, the world outside the reservation has become less than ever hostile to Indian efforts to break away from the cycle of poverty and degradation. Those who can overcome inertia, alcoholism, and the discouragements of their tribal environment stand a chance of constructing their own future. Some degree of assimilation is the inevitable cost, but assimilation is not necessarily synonymous with sell out, nor does it completely obliterate Indianness. It entails an entirely new way of being Indian.

This is a defiant message, explosive of the older axiom that assimilation equals surrender. But Alexie is a writer who has never been saying the things expected of him. His policy in *The Toughest Indian* and *Ten Little Indians* is the policy of the woman in "Can I Get a Witness" who, knowing that she is upsetting her listener with her stories, only calmly informs him: "I'm going to tell you everything, and you're going to listen... Nobody wants to hear these things, but I'm thinking them and I have to say them." (*Ten* 90). Evidently, very much like her, Alexie needs to unburden his mind of what he sees as the truth of the contemporary Indian's situation, regardless of how disturbing that truth may sound to his compatriots and to his readers. Perhaps an indication of how unwelcome it must sound to many of them is the conspicuous absence of any contribution by Alexie to MariJo Moore's *Genocide of the Mind* (2003), a recent anthology of texts by

contemporary Native American writers, critics and public personages, concerned focally with Indian urban experience. That a prominent author most outspoken on precisely this topic either has not been invited, or has declined the invitation to contribute to the book, suggests that irreconcilable differences exist between his and the other contributors' understanding of the problem. Indeed, the anthology communicates faith that, as Vine Deloria, Jr. has written in the Foreword, urbanity entails only "adaptation, not accommodation" (xiv), let alone assimilation. In the hopeful words of the book's editor, "those of us who choose to live in two worlds are doing what we can to keep the fires of our ancestral knowledge burning. Though a difficult task, we will not let these fires be extinguished... We hold fast to what we know, try to teach our children to respect and understand ancestral values" (1). Evidently, Alexie is skeptical about such wishful pronouncements as misrepresenting the experience of those increasingly numerous urban Indians who have successfully and permanently established themselves in the American world. And so he shares his skepticism with his readers, having chosen to reveal life's confusing, often sad complexity, rather than tell hopeful stories meant to fortify and uplift the spirits.

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